Sex education: tips for parents of children with a disability

Young people need to be given sexual health and relationships information that is accurate and suitable for their age and developmental stage, so that they have a positive attitude to their sexuality. As a parent you play an important role in providing this information.

We learn about sexuality and relationships throughout our lives. From a young age your child has learnt about love, affection, touch and relationships from you. There are many opportunities to start to talk about sexuality and relationships as issues arise in everyday situations. Always be prepared to answer your child’s questions as they arise.

There are many positive effects of teaching young people about sexuality. These include:

- understanding physical and emotional changes that occur during puberty and that everybody goes through these changes – this helps to build their self-esteem
- building skills to assist them in responding appropriately in social and sexual situations
- improving communication so that they can talk about sexual matters and use the correct terminology
- reducing the risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections
- providing information and skills to make them less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse

You should start to talk about puberty with them before physical changes occur. Your child’s physical development will typically occur at the same time as their non-disabled peers. Depending on the physical development of your child, puberty usually happens around 14 or 15 years for boys and between 9 and 16 years for girls.

What should be included?
Comprehensive sex education should include information on:

- appropriate and inappropriate behaviour
- sexually transmitted infections
- safer sex
- contraception
- masturbation
- same sex attraction
- puberty and body changes for boys and girls
- friendships and relationships
- physical aspects of sexuality and reproduction
- how to say no to unwanted sexual activity

Teaching tips
Before you start talking about sexuality and relationships you should make sure that you know what you are talking about and that you have the correct information. It’s also a good idea to find out what your child is learning in their sexual health and relationships education classes at school so that you can reinforce their learning.

Some teaching strategies will be more appropriate for your child than others. This will depend on their level of understanding. Strategies can include:

**Using pictures and visual aids.** A full body chart can be drawn by tracing around your child’s outline. This can be used to show where the body parts are and what they do. Photographs of family and friends can be used as the basis for talking about different types of relationships. Videos and DVD’s can also be useful. Anatomical dolls can be used to teach the difference between males and females.

**Using repetition.** Repeat key concepts and reinforce the ideas in other settings. For example, while watching television discuss relationship and sexuality issues as they arise in programs. Remember to give praise as this will help to build their confidence and self-esteem.

**Using a variety of approaches.** People learn in different ways. This may involve verbal discussions, movement, signs, games or role playing. Some ways will work better than others but experiment and learn from successes and mistakes.

**Asking and encouraging questions.** You should ask questions to ensure that they understand the concepts. If you are asked a question that you don’t know the answer to, don’t be afraid to admit it and suggest that you find out the answer together.

**Using the correct terminology.** Use the correct terminology so that you can normalise the words and provide vocabulary that can be used in any situation.
Keeping it simple, light and fun. The biological aspects of sexuality is usually not as important as the practical application. For example, it is more useful to understand that menstruation is normal and learn ways to deal with it than to teach the hormonal basis underlying it. Aim to make sexuality education as ordinary as any other subject and like other learning situations use a sense of humour to make it fun and a positive experience.

Using existing resources. There are many useful resources available from the SHine SA library and the SHine SA website on sexual health and relationships.

Your family’s religious, cultural and social values are also being continuously communicated to your child. It is important to talk to your child about your values so they know what influences your choices and decisions and what is acceptable behaviour.

Resources
The following items are available from the SHine SA library.

This manual aims to educate people with an intellectual disability with a factual and balanced view of the rights and responsibilities associated with a range of sexual activities. There are strong messages about consent, enjoyment, intimacy, privacy and safety.


Jason's private world, Video Education Australasia (2002) Bendigo, Victoria, VHS Video: Duration 18 mins
This animated video is for parents and carers to watch with males who have an intellectual disability. Jason discusses aspects of growing up as a man, body changes and personal hygiene. The program delves into relationships, love, trust and sexual interactions.

Kylie's private world, Video Education Australasia (2002) Bendigo, Victoria, VHS Video: Duration 18 mins
This animated video is for parents and carers to watch with females who have an intellectual disability. Kylie discusses aspects of growing up as a woman, periods, body changes and personal hygiene. The program delves into relationships, love, trust and sexual interactions.

SHine SA has a free illustrated booklet called Friendships and dating: Information about relationships for parents, carers and young people with a disability (2007)
SHine SA also has fact sheets on puberty information for parents of boys and girls with a disability, available on the SHine SA website.

SHine SA contact details
East/West Primary Health Care Team
GP Plus Health Care Centre
64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5300
Clinic appointments: 8300 5301

Northern Primary Health Care Team
43 Peachey Road, Davoren Park SA
Tel: 8256 0700

Southern Primary Health Care Team
19–23 Beach Road, Christies Beach SA
Tel: 8186 8600

Workforce Development & Resources
64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5317
Email: SHineSACourses@health.sa.gov.au

Library & Resource Centre
64c Woodville Road, Woodville SA
Tel: 8300 5312
Email (Library): SHineSALibrary@health.sa.gov.au

Sexual Healthline
Available 9 am – 1 pm, Monday – Friday
Tel: 1300 883 793
Country callers (toll free): 1800 188 171
Email: sexualhealthhotline@health.sa.gov.au

Website www.shinesa.org.au

National Relay Service: www.relayservice.com.au
133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen)

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